DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 155 696 CS 204 124

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TITLE The Interview as a Practical Research Model.
PUB DATE 78
NOTE 15p.; Guide prepared at Wichita State University ; Best copy available

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Composition (Literary); *Composition Skills (Literary); *Descriptive Writing; English Instruction; Higher Education; *Interviews; Models; Research Methodology; *Research Skills; *Teaching Techniques
IDENTIFIERS *Research Papers

ABSTRACT

Writing an interview paper provides students with a contextual framework for research inquiry because it helps them to identify and develop their own conceptual and investigative skills through dialogue with another person. Before the actual interview, it is important to choose a subject to interview and to organize the background material, to set up the interview in the subject's characteristic surroundings, and to prepare a list of questions that identify the subject's base of authority and reflect facts and ideas. Guidelines for writing the interview paper are as follows: develop a hypothesis or meaning statement about the subject; provide a setting and a beginning; convey a sense of the personality through quotations and action descriptions; report the information of the interview by means of anecdotes, descriptions, and significant details; present a time perspective by relating the person's past experience to the present conditions; and conclude the interview with a sense of closure. (Excerpts from effective student interviews are included.) (HAI)

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THE INTERVIEW AS A PRACTICAL RESEARCH MODEL

Few students enter a writing class ready to write a research paper. Even if they know how to take notes and organize them, they seldom understand what it means to work on a research problem. Research is really a process, a sustained inquiry that involves a sense of purpose, a knowledge of method, some intuition, and most important, a framework of ideas within which the inquiry can take place. Our academic disciplines exist for this very purpose of framing questions for scholars. But most students do not possess such a framework; unable to see the contextual outlines of a subject, they feel threatened by it and like good conservatives, avoid spending time on a project that might lead nowhere.

Our job as teachers, then, is to show students how to explore new subjects by building on the knowledge they already possess. If we can help them identify and develop their present conceptual and investigative skills, they can proceed to refine their techniques as they engage new subjects and begin to write about them. One way to acquaint students with these basic research skills is to assign an interview paper. Writing the interview allows them to use their already developed social skills both to elicit a response from the person, and to evaluate, or draw conclusions from what they have heard. In essence, an interview is a dialogue between the researcher and another person. As such, it is not unlike the interchange, or "dialectic" that scholars carry on with their data; in both cases, the researcher is engaging in that process of question and answer, or probing and evaluating that constitutes any kind of inquiry. In short, by writing the interview, students develop the

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same skills necessary to writing the research paper. Later on, their experience with the interview can be used as a paradigm for teaching the process of inquiry that forms the basis of any research paper.

Preparing students for writing the interview paper means helping them do the necessary groundwork before that first meeting with the subject. Generally, the interviewer is expected to choose the subject, and so the first question is -- Who? Then there are the mechanics of setting up the meeting, taking notes, and the problem of what in the world to talk about. My own instructions to the students go something like this:

1. Choosing a subject. The best way is to start with people you know. Friends of the family, or people at work make your job easier because you already know a great deal about them, and you are familiar with their surroundings -- their "context." Better yet, these people also know you, and will probably volunteer information about themselves that you didn't even think of asking. One student I know interviewed his boss -- an enterprising lady who had inherited her husband's business of cleaning and maintaining shopping center parking lots between midnight and 7 A.M. He got the interview down on tape as they rode around in a van between Macy's, Penney's and K-Mart. But if the subject is not an acquaintance, it pays to find out something about that person in advance. If the interview will focus on the person's job, find out about the company and its employees. You can collect this background information by asking around, or by spending a couple of hours reading magazines in the library (for example, if you are interviewing a nurse, look through some issues of Nursing or Nursing Forum). The important thing is

to get a general sense of what your subject's job is like before you ask him or her about it. In a formal research paper, this preliminary background search is called establishing the context for the study.

2. Setting up the interview. For some interviews, an appointment is absolutely necessary. For instance, when one of my students interviewed the City Manager of Wichita, Kansas, she had to make an appointment two weeks ahead of time. But calling ahead paid off; the Manager gave her a full half hour, and she was able to ask some involved questions about the city's government. Setting up the meeting ahead of time also makes it easier to find the person in his or her characteristic surroundings. As a general rule, a person's home or place or work tells us a good deal about his or her life; and after all, that's the main purpose of the interview. The City Manager was interviewed im his City Hall office, which is on the 15th fl and has a grand view of the city. After their meeting, the wri began her account simply by describing the Manager seated in front of his picture window, look out over Wichita; as she came in, he swivelled his chair around and recollected himself. One last note on appointments: if the first meeting is held at the person's convenience, it may be possible to ask for a second interview. Depending on the length of the paper and the complexity of the subject matter, this second discussion might be crucial.

3. Taking Notes. Most people won't mind if an interviewer records the discussion on a pad, but other methods are sometimes necessary. If the interviewer finds it hard to keep up with the flow, writing down key words and phrases might be the best solution. Of course there is always the question of whether to try a tape

recorder. Portable units can usually be checked out from the audio-visual office, and there's nothing like a tape for getting down exactly what the person said. However, some people are made nervous by a whirring tape recorder, and often it is difficult to locate the parts you want in a tape that might run as long as an hour. In order to edit the material effectively, you have to transcribe it, and the tedium of this job is indescribable to someone who has never done it. Ultimately, the interviewer has to decide what method works best in his or her own case. The main thing is to record as much as you can, or if that isn't possible, to sit down directly after the interview and write out at length the important parts before you forget them.

4. The sheet of prepared questions. There are several good reasons for bringing prepared questions to the interview. First, the person may not feel like talking that day, and unless you are very well informed about his or her job and other matters, you may find it hard to invent appropriate questions on the spot. Second, and perhaps even more important, your time with the person is limited; if you aren't able to steer the discussion away from small talk, you may find yourself walking away from the interview with only a few general remarks about the person's real interests or opinions.

It is simply unwise, therefore, to go to an interview without at least some brief notes on what you want the person to talk about. It is useful to divide your questions into three groups:

a) Identify the person's basis of authority. Your first questions should prepare the ground for the rest of the discussion by establishing the person's identify and relationship to his or her surroundings. For example, if the person sells chickens to fast food

restaurants, as did the subject of one student's interview, you want to find out how long he has sold poultry, where and when he sells it, and how successfully. It makes a difference, in other words, whether you're getting the opinions of a big-city poultry dealer, or someone who sells a few chickens on Saturdays.

b) Get the facts -- in depth. The need for getting detailed "background" information about the person can't be over-emphasized. Throughout the interview, you will have the chance to ask questions about the details of the person's life and work, but you will ask better, more specific questions if you already have them in hand, neatly typed out, if possible. When it comes time to write up the interview, being able to describe the person's job and methods of working will add depth to your account, and will also provide that detailed glimpse of "real life" which readers enjoy in any piece of writing.

c) Get a clear picture of the person's ideas. You can't really know what the person will say before it comes out in the discussion, but you can and should prepare yourself to follow up on the ideas and opinions when they emerge. And if the person doesn't volunteer a point of view, it's your job to ask about it. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of interviews is their capacity to let the reader see the world through the eyes of one particular person. So you must be ready to suggest ways for the person to talk about his or her ideas; for example, you can ask the person to analyze a problem, to explain the causes of a situation, or trace the history of some of his or her interests. Often, the person will use a special phrase or expression which seems to sum up a point of view; try to record the exact wording of such key phrases, and make some

notes to yourself on how that phrase was meant. One student used this technique when he interviewed a bum on East Douglas, Wichita's skid row. The student pulled out a tape recorder, but the bum pushed it away, saying "When you're comen offa wine drunk, you don't wanna talk inta one of those things." Luckily, the student had a good ear for language, and produced a good interview even without his tapes.

In the foregoing section, I have discussed how the interviewer chooses a person to interview, forms a sense of the person's "background" in order to know what questions to ask, and finally prepares some actual questions which can be used in the interview. These steps correspond roughly to the beginning stages of a research project, in which the investigator senses a problematic situation, or conflict in the material, then states the problem by specifying what kinds of things have to be known in order to explain the conflict, and last, devises a set of questions with which to explore the problem.. These "leading" (or "heuristic") questions provide new information and new perspectives on the problem, thereby preparing the investigator to formulate a hypothesis, or possible solution. The same function is performed by the interviewer's questions (both the prepared ones and others which arise spontaneously) when they are put to work during the interview: using these questions, the interviewer tries to open up perspectives into the person's character, situation and attitudes -- material which later makes it possible to create a vivid, rounded, meaningful account of that person's life experience.

The next step in the process of inquiry, as in interviewing, is to arrive at the hypothesis, or meaningful statement about the subject.

Unfortunately, there is no rule we can follow, either to formulate a hypothesis about a problem, or to derive a meaningful statement about the subject of an interview. Still, there are some general guidelines. In problem solving, an investigator tries to match known concepts with the problem situation, hoping to explain the new pattern as a transformation or variation of the old one. In writing an interview, we can employ another kind of pattern as a matrix, or mold, in an attempt to give shape to the information our questions supply about the person. This pattern has five parts:

1. Arriving on the scene. Writing an interview is like writing a narrative, insofar as one is describing an interaction between two people, providing a setting for that action, and devising ways to introduce the readers into this "scene" at the beginning, and lead them out of it at the end. Here we are concerned with the beginning. The main function of the beginning is to help the reader become accustomed to looking over the writer's shoulder, so to speak. Perhaps the easiest way for the writer to do this is simply to describe his or her own entry onto the scene -- the arrival at the person's home or the drive out to the job. One student, who was interviewing a local astrologer, produced the following introduction:

> Astrology is defined in the dictionary as a pseudo science but to Mildred Schuler it is "the basic science" and I wouldn't want to argue the point with this local astrologer. She has been charting, studying and interpreting the heavenly bodies for fifty years and is a staunch believer that "education is knowledge of astrology." I was anxious to meet this Astrological Authority, although I had no idea what type of person to expect when I knocked at the door of the little white cottage in East

Wichita. I half-anticipated a jewelry-laden, cosmetic-masked and veiled lady but instead the woman that asked me into her home could have been my own grandmother, dear, sweet grandmother, complete in blue gingham sundress." (Beverly Danly)

2. Conveying a sense of the character. In this last passage, the writer lets us experience her own initial feeling of having "no idea what type of person to expect," but by this time, of course, we already know that Mildred Schuler is "a staunch believer that 'education is knowledge of astrology.'" Indeed, the heart of any interview is this sense of the subject's character, which emerges from overt comments by the writer, from the person's movements, gestures, anecdotes and opinions, and even from oblique hints, such as this brief description of two dogs:

> At 1:15 I turned into the driveway and was promptly greeted by two German Shepherds barking furiously. However, by the time I had stopped the car, they were both standing on their hind legs looking in the driver's window and wagging their tales. This was my welcome to the home of Beth-Anne Chard, who greeted me at the door and warmly accepted me into her home. (Shirley Leftwich)

Perhaps the most common technique for conveying character, however, is the direct description of what the person does during the interview. This running description keeps us from losing our sense of the person's presence in the scene; it might also be called a "narrative line" because it holds the interview together, providing a frame for the anecdotes and background information which take up the discussion. Here are two examples of how the writer can convey the person's character, while at the same time introducing matters for discussion:

First, an interview with a child in a reform school:

> We sat down on the floor in the hall, and she pulled a cigarette out of her tiny purse and lit it. Deciding that the best choice would be to ignore it, I began by asking her why she had to go to court in the first place.
>
> "Shoplifting" was her answer and given with a really "cute" smile. I am sure that the look on my face belied my answer of "Oh yeah." I was mortified. She looked very young, so I asked her how old she was. She told me that she was eleven years old and that she had done about everything, including stabbing her cat with a fork. (Dana Decker)

Next, a Wichita surgeon:

> I explained that seven weeks ago I had noticed an item in the newspaper concerning an unusual sort of surgery which he had performed here in Wichita. He nodded. I continued that to my knowledge few such operations had been successful even on the international level. He agreed. "Why has it been kept such a secret?"
>
> "Damn," he said. He was picking small quill-like seeds off his pants. He smiled, "I've been attacked by a porcupine which lives alongside my driveway." He continued plucking at the seeds for a moment and then continued. "It's not a secret at all. It just hasn't been publicized." (Margie Pollock)

Notice that in this second passage, the writer has managed both to give us a strong sense of the character's presence, and at the same time, to give us a subtle insight into the doctor's thinking.

3. <u>The Cargo of information</u>. Aside from the fascination of glimpsing the quality of another person's life, the interview's

main source of power is its promise of information -- the facts, the inside story, the distilled wisdom of a person's life and work, if you will. As Aristotle tells us, however, the trick is to mingle instruction with delight -- in this case, to make sure the new material retains the flavor of the experiences and the outlook peculiar to that person. Probably the most effective way to introduce this substantive material is simply to record the person's anecdotes. People find it natural to explain matters by telling stories about themselves and others (the rhetorical term is exempla, or "parables"), and as long as the narrative line, or sense of scene is maintained, the writer can build a strong interview from such tales. The following anecdote is from an interview with a gravedigger:

> Sandy soil is another obstacle for gravediggers near Williams, Indiana -- situated along White River. With an ornery, little-boy expression on his face, Fout recalled an incident involving that soil. "I had instructed this preacher not to stand too close to the open gravesite 'cause I hadn't reinforced the edges. As he pronounced the benediction and poised his right arm over the casket his body leaned forward and disappeared into the grave. I had to chuckle to myself," Fout recalled. (Linda Jones)

Anecdotes are not the only method of conveying information about the character's job or primary interests, of course. For short periods, the writer can step in and relate the pertinent facts directly to the reader. The only requirements are that the information should add to our understanding of the person involved, and that these facts generate their own interest. Here is such an informative section from the same interview with Fout the Gravedigger:

> A new era arrived in 1957 when Fout incorporated the use of a mechanical digger. Opposed to many, like myself, who might have thought this to mean the end of hard labor, the device is far from the answer to all manual tasks. Hand digging is done in the final stage of every grave to ensure exactness -- the bottom must be perfectly level. A carpenter's level is used for this purpose. In the closing of a grave the machinery is useless and the human back solely supports the process. A wooden paddle is used to edge the dirt in and around the sides of the vault, then a hand tamp, weighing approximately 11 lbs. is used to pack the blanket of earth over the sealed tomb. (Linda Jones)

The interview's utility as a vehicle for information is its most obvious similarity to the research paper, and to be sure, the material for many research projects is gathered primarily through interviews. Less obvious, perhaps, is the resemblance between the researcher's exploration, or analysis of his subject, and the way the writer of an interview explores the character and life experience of a person by focussing on significant details such as the smoking habits of a reform school child, or the way a gravedigger hand-shapes a grave. In each case, the writer is applying methods of rhetorical invention, trying to "discover" the best ideas for bringing out the truth of his or her subject.

4. <u>The time dimension</u>. Supplying information about a job or other experience opens up one sort of perspective, or "dimension" in a person's life. But a further dimension can be added by drawing out the relationship between the person's past experience and his or her present conditions. Call it the time dimension, a sense of

history, or just "roots" -- the effect is the same: the reader begins to see a meaningful pattern in the person's life as it develops over a period of years. It is just this sense of purpose in a life, and perhaps even more, the fulfillment and clarification of a purpose, that arises from the best interviews, and allows them to make a statement worthy of the person they describe. Here is such a statement about Jim Banks, a mechanic:

> "I don't know how I got started," he added. "I have been a mechanic around the country most of my life, the past 25 or 30 years, and I just decided that I wanted an old car. So in 1955, I bought a Model T Ford and restored it, and I've been buying and restoring ever since.
>
> As Jim has pointed out, restoring can sometimes be expensive and is always time consuming, but the final result is worth the effort. It is gratifying to take a rusty, broken down piece of junk, and through diligent, hard work, turn it into a masterpiece. "It's like saving a piece of history," Jim Banks said quietly, "and if we don't do it, they'll be gone forever. They won't be coming back." (Jerry Glessner)

This "statement" the interviewer makes about the person's life is best described as supplying a perspective in time, but really it is more like the fundamental theme of the interview, drawing strength from all the other parts. For unless the writer's treatment of the person's character and occupation have prepared us for our long retrospective look, we won't get the desired sense of inevitability as we see the person arriving finally at his or her present condition after years of effort. This sense of a basic pattern emerging in a person's life is probably the most difficult effect for an

interviewer to achieve. Nevertheless, by trying to achieve it, writers cease to be mere takers of notes and become interpreters of experience, on a par with research workers, whose hypotheses, or new statements about the facts, are simply another kind of interpretation.

5. Leaving the interview. Ending an interview presents the same problems as ending a piece of fiction: one has to avoid the "bump" when the reader falls out of the story on the last page. It is possible simply to end with the person's answer to the last question, but if the writer has maintained throughout a sense of scene, or interaction between the two people, it is best to give their discussion a sense of closure. One way to do this is to show the interviewer leaving the scene, glancing back on it, or thinking about it in order to give the reader a way of holding the interview in memory. Here is the way Linda Jones ended her interview with Fout:

> I extended my hand to him and thanked him, and his smile warmed the chilly air as he said, "Ya know, it's a funny thing. I always read all them Thank-You's in the newspaper after a funeral: Thank-you for your flowers; thank-you for your prayers; thank-you for sending food; and to Preacher So and So and Doctors So and So, but Nobody ever thanks the Gravedigger." Then, quite unexpectedly, my interviewed subject took off his frayed brim grey hat and shaking my hand tightly, said, "Thank-you, Mizz Jones. You've made my day!" I glanced in the rear-view mirror as I waited for a break in the traffic to enter the street. Fout was still leaning against the service gate, his hat still dangling from his hand.

In summary, the chief advantages of the interview as an introductory research assignment are 1) It brings the writer directly into contact with the material, and 2) It puts to use the writer's life-long training in carrying out question-and-answer routines, sifting the evidence, and drawing conclusions about the motives, experience and personality of the other person. The teacher's task is then to guide the students in applying these skills by providing general guidelines like those suggested above, and by pointing out analogies between the process of interviewing and the process of inquiry which they will be practicing in the future.